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ABSTRACT

In a personal account, a now-tenured English and Women's Studies professor at the University of Minnesota recounts the difficulties involved in identifying herself as a lesbian with her students, fellow faculty, and college administrators. As she moved toward tenure review, her college hired the only dean of color in the university. This dean became her ally because he understood the politics of difference. Although she asserts that all scholarship is political, because she does not see composition studies journals as vehicles for social change and activism, she has instead edited, collaborated on, and published in Women's Studies. The professor feels that to break the widely-held assumption that everyone is heterosexual, gay men and lesbians need to constantly "come out" as a way of defying the stereotypes that make them invisible. Looking at homophobia as similar to all other forces of oppression that limit peoples' lives and connecting fighting heterosexism to fighting racism is one way of defying dangerous stereotypes. (SAM)

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Tenured, Out and Still Composed

Lisa Albrecht
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General College, University of Minnesota

Conference on College Composition and Communication, San Diego, California, April, 1993

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

Tenured, Out and Still Composed

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When Pam Olano asked me to be a part of this panel, I was delighted. I thought that this was going to be an easy one...talking about the "beyond the job market." -- tenured at a big ten institution; out at the University of Minnesota for eight years; and, as i named this talk, still composed. I wish it felt that simple.

People like Pam give me strength and hope. She's out as a graduate student. At my first 4 C's conference over a dozen years ago in Detroit, I was also a graduate student, out to most folks, but not organizing like Pam is. I presented a paper on my dissertation research--a study of the autobiographical writing experiences of ten published feminist women writers. I had interviewed some wonderful women, likeAudre Lorde and Marge Piercy, as well as "upcoming" writers like Gloria Anzaldua and Beth Brant. I said the "L" word during my talk, as well as words like racism and classism. Nobody threw rotten tomatoes. In fact, I met some wonderful folks from the Progressive Composition Caucus, and found my first home base in 4 C's. I think there were two panels at the entire conference that year that had the word "woman" in their titles. Nothing about gay men or lesbians.

After the Detroit 4 C's, i went back to SUNY/Buffalo to try to finish my degree. I lost my half time faculty position soon after my return. My white male heterosexual dissertation chair didn't understand my research at all, but he knew enough to be nervous about what i was doing. He also happened to be my boss. I was not surprised when he did not re-hire me.

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Needless to say, i did finish my Ph.d. in 1984, spent a year looking for a job, and landed the position I still have at the University of Minnesota, where I teach writing in General College, the college that serves underprepared students. I also hold joint appointments in Women's Studies and the Center for Advanced Feminist Studies, where I teach both undergraduate and graduate courses. I did not come out during my job interview or in my initial quarter's teaching in General College. I felt like I needed to scope out the terrain. I was out, however, in Women's Studies immediately. I had no questions about being out there, even though I was stunned to find many tenured lesbians still in the closet. Within six months of life in the "tenuous track," I knew I needed to be out in both my worlds to survive intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. I remain stunned today at how many gay and lesbian academics are still in the closet, including many in 4 C's. Yes, in James Baldwin's words, I know "the price of the ticket," but the amount of internalized homophobia so many of us carry is staggering. It is just as toxic as the institutionalized heterosexism that surrounds us in the academy.

In my first years at the U. of M. straight folks in General College were, for the most part, well meaning. They kept their distance from me and during yearly reviews managed to comment on the political nature of my scholarship. Some male colleagues avoided me and found me too aggressive. Being a New York Jew certainly made my dyke status even more complicated for my Lake Wobegon midwestern colleagues. Some female colleagues even got visibly nervous around me in the bathroo as well. All in all, it took several years to train my colleagues to "get it," and treat me with simple respect. My deans during those early years were elder statesmen and women. They didn't get it. I was constantly tap dancing toward tenure over their minefields. During one year, i had to file a grievance against one dean; on the surface, my case had nothing to do with being a Jewish working class dyke, but underneath the surface, it had everything to do with it.

As I moved toward tenure, my college hired the only dean of color at my university. He has been a wonderful ally to me from the moment he took office. He understands about the politics of difference. During my tenure track years and since, I have avoided publishing in composition studies; I edited a gay and lesbian literary journal, Evergreen Chronicles for a number of years, and I have published in Women's Studies. All my work has been collaborative. It has constantly looked at the intersections of race, class, gender and sexual orientation in the context of working for social change. One co-edited book I did is on feminist alliance politics (Bridges of Power: Women's Multicultural Alliances, co-edited with Rose M. Brewer, New Society Publisher, 1990). Another is coming out by the end of this year, and it's on feminist anti-racist politics (The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism, co-edited with Jacqui Alexander, Sharon Day and Mab Segrest, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press). I'm not sure why I haven't gone for the gold in our professional journals. I think I've felt too scared of being rejected more than I already have been. I don't see our journals as vehicles for social change or activism, so it feels bizarre to me to try to write something for them. Yet, I have been visible in 4 C's at conferences and on different committees. That is because of some folks who are willing to recognize that there needs to be different kinds of academics who have "seats at the table." I am profoundly grateful to two women leaders in this organization, Lilly Bridwell-Bowles and Jacki Royster. They have mentored me and cared deeply about who I am and the work that I do. And they believe in fighting for social justice on many fronts. There aren't so many others around like them. We do not need more compositionists to jump on the cultural diversity bandwagon without questioning their own power and privilege. We need less multicultural rhetoric from our established rhetoricians, and more action to empower historically marginalized groups. We definitely need fewer multicultural texts, especially when the majority of them, edited by straight white folks, never include anything about gay and lesbian peoples, or anything about changing the power relations in this country.

I spent a couple of days at the ocean before this conference and did a lot of reflecting on my life as a feminist compositionist over the past decade. The ocean and its roaring waves really helped, especially since I'm such an ocean deprived soul in Minnesota.

I always have said that what is most essential for my survival is being able to look in the mirror at the end of each day, and feel right about the choices I have made. that got me through the tenure process. More so than the thought of becoming an "associate professor." I do know how lucky I am to be doing what I want to do. Not so many people are as lucky. Perhaps, with more of us coming out in graduate school and coming out as undergraduates, more of us already in the academy will have the courage to come out as well. I also believe that if we can build alliances with other historically marginalized groups, it will be easier for all of us to fight the oppression we face. However, not enough white gay and lesbian people are willing to fight racism with the same energy we use to fight heterosexism. I think that's a terrible mistake. None of us are free until all of us are free. We already have an anti-racist and anti-gay majority in this country, but we haven't figured out how best to work together. That needs to be our task as we cross into the 21st century.

I also want to say that I am tired. I'm going to be 42 years old tomorrow and I'd like to feel less tired. It is hard mentoring young lesbian and gay students. Don't get me wrong--I love doing it, and draw great strength from it, but it is emotionally draining to have to always be there. It is hard to be one of the only out queer faculty on my campus that my campus newspaper constantly calls for quotes about anything gay or lesbian. It is also hard having to constantly explain to my colleagues why all scholarship is political, not just feminist and multicultural and gay and lesbian scholarship. Sometimes i get very tired of fighting for social change every minute of every day.

It is also hard always coming out to students. For people who don't understand how heterosexism works, let me explain. The given in this society is that we are all heterosexual. To break this assumption, gay men and lesbians need to constantly come out to people to defy the stereotypes that make us invisible. It is exhausting to always have to figure out when and how to come out, and it is exhausting to decide when not to come out. One of my favorite students this past fall in my freshman composition class, a young heterosexual white male nicknamed Flip (i kid you not) wrote this in his final self-evaluation: "I think it was really cool how you told the class you were a lesbian. I think that really opened up people's eyes. It made people think that normal people can be homosexual. Just wanted to say that was cool."

I'm not sure exactly how to close this after reading Flip's words. I urge all of you here to take what's been most useful from all of us. Heterosexuals here, build bridges with your gay and lesbian colleagues, and don't assume we're going to hit on you. To my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, don't look at homophobia as isolated from all the other forces of oppression that limit people's lives. Connect fighting heterosexism to racism. Lastly, look in the mirror every day, and be able to live with the choices you have made. Thank you.